

What's Coming Up:

Janet Macunovich answers your growing concerns
Issue 28, February 14, 2009

Here you'll find:



Why would a begonia and its gorgeous foliage hold court most beautifully from within a terrarium? Read on. Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

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Crown that kingly begonia a finicky subject

Tonja wonders, "Do you know anything about a **begonia plant, escargot**? I saw it in a garden walk, bought one and I don't even know if it is an annual or perennial. I brought it **in the house** but it is **not doing well**."

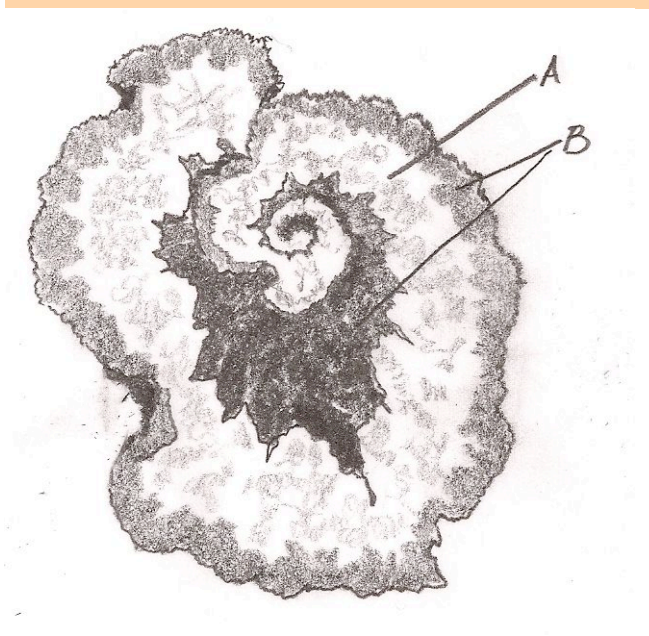
"Thanks for the weekly emails - I get up on Saturdays and that is the first thing I do. (Well, I make my coffee first)."

I'm really pleased to be a part of your Saturday breakfast, Tonja. Once, I breakfasted regularly with several begonias closely related to the one you describe. They are zone 10 (or warmer) perennials which can live many years if grown as houseplants or summered out then moved in out of the cold every fall.

I loved them but gave them up. My **house is too dry in winter and too uneven in temperature**, and I did not want to **resort to growing them in terrariums**.

Based on the report of the very good growers at Glasshouse Works*, who write of 'Escargot,' "We emphatically do not recommend this challenging (though fabulously beautiful) *Begonia* as

the first *Begonia* you have ever tried to grow," I suspect some of the hurdles I faced and failed to overcome may be facing you.



'Escargot' is a Rex begonia** (*Begonia rex-cultorum*). That's a species grown primarily for its foliage. It's been crossed with many other begonias over the last couple centuries to give us several hundred varieties with large, bold-patterned foliage. Variety 'Escargot' has white leaves (A in my drawing at left) with a broad green margin (B), a bit of pewter at the edge plus a striking example of the species' distinctive snail-spiral flourish at the heel. It's a variety that's been turning heads in Europe for some time. Recently it garnered some media attention in the U.S., which stimulated demand and then increased production. Grown well, it's somewhere between 12 and 18 inches tall and broad, with pale pink to nearly white flowers that are not particularly showy.

All of the Rex begonias **suffer from mildew problems*****, particularly if the humidity is below 30% or the temperature goes below 60°F or much above 70°F. They like what amounts to a lot of light for an indoor setting (the average office is illuminated with about 75 foot-candles of light; these plants want 150 to 500 foot-candles). Yet they **do not tolerate heat**, so don't set them on sills that are good cat-basking seats. My house gets too cool at night, especially near the windows. So even though I watered carefully to avoid wet foliage and let the potting soil dry down a little between waterings in winter, my begonias were always losing leaves faster than they could produce new.

Good luck. Let me know if your plant perks up with any of this help, and I'll let you know what other advice may come in from our What's Coming Up network.

*For more, copy this URL to your browser and scroll to or find for Begonia 'Escargot' --

<http://www.glasshouseworks.com/trop-b.html>

**For an intensive article on Rex begonia history, care, and examples including 'Escargot', copy this URL to your browser --

www.rhs.org.uk/learning/publications/pubs/garden1206/begoniarex.asp

***<http://mrec.ifas.ufl.edu/foilage/folnotes/begonias.htm>

Grow a royal begonia in courtly style:

Grow Rex begonias in very **free-draining potting soil** in a relatively **shallow pot**. That's all their mostly-shallow root system needs. In a deep pot, soil below the root mass isn't "tapped" by the plant so it doesn't dry when the surface layer dries. It becomes a continually moist reservoir for fungal spores.

Remove any discolored leaf as soon as you see it becoming pale. Don't allow any dead bits of leaf to lie around on the potting soil surface.

Don't wet the leaves when you water. That can encourage bacterial leaf spot* -- a foliage problem that cows even professional growers.

Pot with the begonia's crown right at the soil surface. If you grew it outdoors and then transplanted it into a pot for the winter when you brought it indoors, check that it's not set too deep. Rex begonias struggle if planted even a bit deep since their roots need plenty of air.

*Copy this URL to your browser to learn more --
http://web.aces.uiuc.edu/vista/pdf_pubs/659.pdf

Cede the ground under a cedar: Bare space is no crime!

"I have cedar trees (**junipers**) and have a hard time **getting ajuga to grow underneath** them," says J.E.S. "Could it be too acidic? What plant can you recommend (partial sun) there?"

We celebrate six months of *What's Coming Up* with a report of *What's Coming Next*

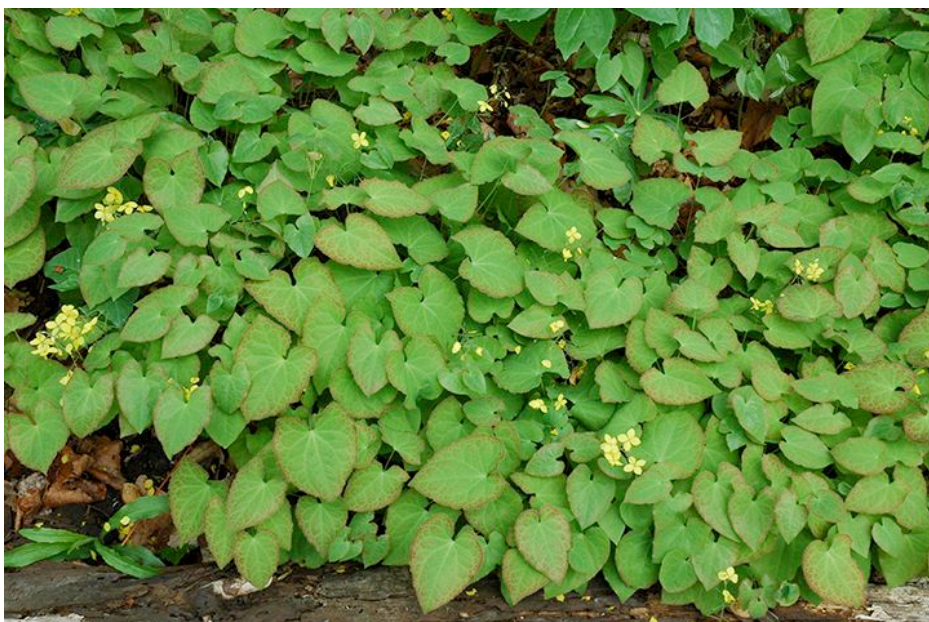
My husband, Steven Nikkila and I have been self-publishing and direct-distributing *What's Coming Up* for six months now. Many of you have queried us about how it's going. A special edition illustrated report is coming to your mailbox this weekend in answer to those non-gardening questions.

If the *Ajuga* is having nutritional problems because the pH is too low, it's because your soil in general is way below 6.0 on the pH scale. If you're in the Midwest, that's not likely. I'll bet money that your **soil pH is not being significantly affected by evergreen needles**. The often heard advice that "pine needles make the soil too acidic" has no basis in fact. The same holds true for warnings about juniper, spruce or fir needles.

There's no need to take my word for this. Test it as I have. Purchase two or more soil sampling kits from your local Extension (find its location in a phone directory under County government or go to www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension/). Submit one soil sample from under your evergreens and another from out in the open in your yard. Your Extension soil testing lab will tell you that there is little or no difference between the two when it comes to relative acidity.

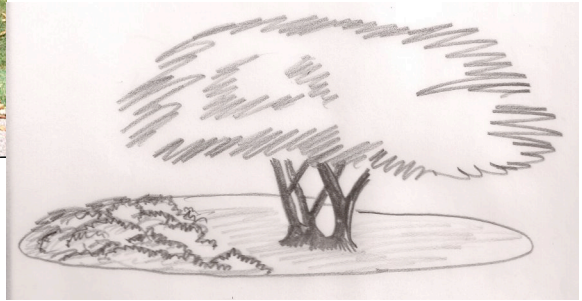
What makes it **tough for plants under evergreens** is **drought and shade**. Even in winter, the evergreen's canopy blocks precipitation. *Ajuga* is a lover of consistently moist soil and so is not a reliable groundcover in dry shade. Deadnettle (*Lamium maculatum*) or barrenwort (*Epimedium* varieties, particularly *E. versicolor*) may fare better, although even these will need regular watering to become established and then self-sufficient beneath evergreen trees.

Keep an eye out for other limbed-up evergreens of the type you're working with. Note what grows there. In landscapes as in Nature, you'll probably see more bare ground than greenery.



Epimedium versicolor 'Sulfureum'
Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

Some call such a plant a groundcover; others say it's invasive. And some simply call it a friendly creature, which likes to spend its time visiting its neighbors.
- Unknown -



Even grass dies out under this juniper. Yet space is not a bad thing. Often when people show me photos of ground they wish to fill with plants, what I see is acceptable void, restful to the eye. We, the garden-viewing public and our plants might all be happier if "offending" space was simply made larger, so any new plants could be placed out beyond the dripline of existing evergreens. Photo ©2009 Steven Nikkila

pHacts about soil acidity and plant growth

Soil **pH is measured on a scale of 1 to 14**. 1 is a very strong acid, 7 is neutral water, and 14 is a very strong basic (alkaline) solution.

On the pH scale **every step represents a ten-fold change**, so soil at pH 8.0 is ten times more alkaline than 7.0.

Most **plants grow well in soil with a pH of 6.0 to 7.0** -- that's neutral or slightly acidic.

The **effect pH has on plants** is nutritional. Nutrients are more or less available at different pH levels. It's a matter of how the acidic or alkaline soil solution reacts with chemicals such as iron, phosphorus and magnesium in those soil particles.

Gardeners should worry less about pH and more about light, moisture and soil aerification. Plants have a wide tolerance for pH if other growing conditions are good. A species such as white oak (*Quercus alba*), known to prefer acid soil, occurs naturally and in quantity in my neck of the woods where most soils are neutral to alkaline. That white

oak forest thrives despite high pH because the environment is great in all other ways.

Additions of organic matter tend to lower pH -- make moist soil more acidic. In potting soils that's very important. However, the **change is negligible to modest out in a garden**. For instance, my soil has been supplied annually with two to three times the amount of fall leaves that would cover it naturally. Yet 30 years later it registers only slightly less alkaline (7.4) than it was to start (7.6).

Adding sulfur or calcium **can lower or raise the pH**, respectively. To acidify soil we add sulfur in its elemental form -- "soil sulfur" -- or as aluminum sulfate or iron sulfate. To "sweeten" soil --bring overly acid soil more toward neutral or alkaline -- we use calcium carbonate, a.k.a. gypsum.

The **effectiveness of adding sulfur or calcium varies with type of soil**. Three pounds of iron sulfate might change 100 square feet of sandy bed from pH 7.5 to 6.5. A clay bed of that size would need almost eight pounds of iron sulfate to drop one point.

Escape winter's gloom in a good garden book

Nancy asks us, "Have you ever read the **book, *Radical Prunings***, by Bonnie Thomas Abbott? You would find it very amusing, as it is based on a garden newsletter, but goes in to much more. Very funny!"

Thanks, Nancy, a **good book is welcome company** as winter white gives way to mud season. Books that make us laugh about gardens are particularly good. I appreciate the recommendation.

Anyone **have other titles worth sharing?**

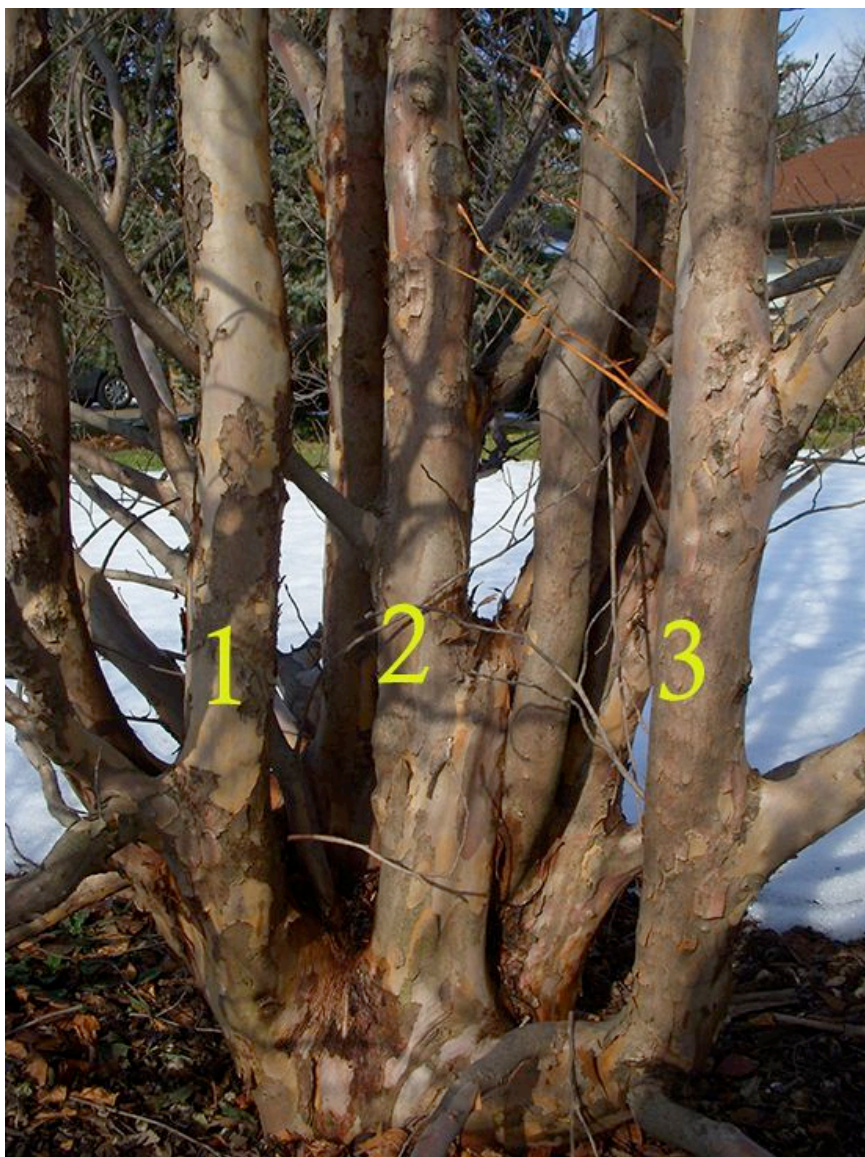
This week in Janet's garden Grow with me! This week I will:

Prune woodies **when weather is dry and mild** by day and will not drop more

than a few degrees below freezing during the couple of nights following my cuts. For instance, this week I **cut out a troubling trunk** on my favorite multi-trunk *Stewartia*. (Before the cut, left, and after, right.)

Gather ye rose-buds while ye may:
Old time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today,
To-morrow will be dying.
-- Robert Herrick --





Left: Multi-trunk trees may have visual appeal but they often die in sections as they attain significant size. That's because one trunk's expansion stops the growth of another. For instance, trunk number two of the *Stewartia pseudocamellia* I pruned was caught between #1 and those directly behind it. It was doomed to die by girdling by its mates within a few years. Until then, its presence was also taking a toll on the others as its side branches rub and injure wood they cross. I cut out the #2 trunk, removing it in sections. Trunks #1, #3 and those that are directly behind #2 in this photo will all have room to grow.

Below: I'll keep the pieces now because they may come in handy to create a rustic arbor or garden ornament.

I'm crossing my fingers that I'll soon be able to **trim two Japanese maples** I had intended to tame last December. There were very few breaks in that unusually cold month but the real limiter was my decision to document the trees' transformation. To be able to saw and also shoot we need good pruning weather to coincide with good photographic conditions.



Put on my designer's hat and **look sharp while the ground's bare**. If something looks good now in the depths of winter it is definitely a keeper and deserves to have the rest of a garden or landscape built around it. Sometimes the star in a yard is **a crabapple with tiny colorful fruits** that cling through winter, attracting robins and cedar waxwings. Other times, it's a cluster of **ornamental grasses**, engaging the eye as they ruffle in the breeze or **glow in low angle sun**. Such stars should be supported by or balanced with evergreen interest. If that's lacking it's very apparent now and often the "fix" -- an addition or move -- is just as clear.

Wrap-up with Grins and Grow-ans that turn our green thumbs up or down

Grins: To **having friends over** for an old fashioned working bee. This weekend I'm taking my tools to a party that will leave them and me in fine fettle. It's a **tool-cleaning**, blade-sharpening, mood-lifting gathering of gardeners. We'll talk as we share round steel wool to remove rust, honing stones to de-burr pruning shears, files to refine spade blades, and oil to renew wooden handles. Why not set up your own party for next weekend? I'll help -- next Saturday morning I'll give you a list of materials and simple tools to get the job done along with instructions for care of some common tools.

Grow-ans: To over-**analyzing a bouquet** this Valentine's Day. Let's be glad to be living in an age where flowers are simply beautiful, rather than in Victorian times when every posey became a puzzle **via the Language of Flowers**. Back then one was faced with divining whether the giver intended an amaryllis to comment on your "pride" or commend your "splendid beauty." You might wonder whether the message of temperance conveyed by an azalea was a prescription or an excuse. As for **roses**, they could as easily stoke your anger as warm your heart since that flower could speak its species' most simple message - **I love you** -- or carry nuance by color -- white for pure love, yellow **for jealousy**. Even the position of a bloom had significance such as inverted flowers reversing normal meanings. Hmm, did the delivery person jostle this vase or was that white lily upside down a-purpose to say "you are the very opposite of pure at heart"?

The Lily and the Rose

The nymph must lose her female friend,
If more admired than she -
But where will fierce contention end,
If flowers can disagree.

Within the garden's peaceful scene
Appear'd two lovely foes,
Aspiring to the rank of queen,
The Lily and the Rose.

The Rose soon redden'd into rage,
And, swelling with disdain,
Appeal'd to many a poet's page
To prove her right to reign.

The Lily's height bespoke command,
A fair imperial flower;
She seem'd designed for Flora's hand,
The sceptre of her power.

This civil bick'ring and debate
The goddess chanced to hear,
And flew to save, ere yet too late,
The pride of the parterre.

Yours is, she said, the nobler hue,
And yours the statelier mien;
And, till a third surpasses you,
Let each be deemed a queen.

Thus, sooth and reconciled, each seeks
The fairest British fair;
The seat of empire is her cheeks,
They reign united there.

-- Cowper --

Who's Janet?

The gardener's trainer. For over twenty years Janet Macunovich has been helping gardeners grow through her classes, books and other publications. She shares what she learns in attending classes herself at educational institutions all over the country, reading, participating in professional symposia, and applying it all in her own and client's gardens. To learn more, email questions to her at JMaxGarden@aol.com.

Where to catch Janet in-person:

Thursday, February 19 at The Midwest Gardening Symposium: **Local Color**. Part of the one day celebration "Incredible, Edible Gardens" at Olbrich Gardens in Madison, Wisconsin. Janet will help you learn how tones and other influences of indigenous plants, light and even building materials can alter perennial color and garden design. Other topics that day are *Edible Estates*, *Attack on the Front Lawn* by Fritz Haeg, *Designing the New Kitchen Garden* by Jennifer Bartley, *Heirlooms for the Midwest Gardener* by David Cavagnaro and *Ornamental Edibles* by Mark Dwyer. \$119 (members, \$99), includes lunch. Call 608-246-4550 to register or go to www.olbrich.org to read more about this event.

February dates to be announced, "Garden by Janet - Bring your gloves and tools!" In both Waterford, Michigan and in Franklin, Michigan, we're **clipping an upright Japanese maple to restrict its size**. We're watching for the next date that's right for tree, gardener and photographer. Want to come learn the art of keeping a tree small? Email or call me (JMaxGarden@aol.com or 248-681-7850) to reserve a spot and learn the location. Include your phone number so I can call you when we set that date. This is a limited-space workshop. Dress for the weather! No charge.

Saturday, February 28, 9 a.m. to noon, **Master Gardener Flower Gardening**. Janet teaches this segment of the Wayne County Michigan State University Extension 2009 Master Gardener course. It's open as always to active Master Gardener volunteers who would like a refresher on a topic. Contact your Master Gardener coordinator for details.

Saturday, March 7, **Propagation**. At the Kent County MSU Extension annual "Stuck on Gardening" conference. Janet leads you through secrets to reproducing all kinds of plants. Other topics at the conference are *Look Ma, No Grass* by Ralph Heiden, *Something Old, Something New* by Rebecca Finneran and *Fall Scaping* by Stephanie Cohen. \$55. For more information call the Kent MSU Extension, 616-336-7734.

Sunday, March 8, 2 p.m. **Your Front Door Garden: A Gorgeous Green Greeting** and

Monday, March 9, 2 p.m., **Natural Landscapes**: What it means to go native on an urban lot." These two talks by Janet are part of an impressive seminar series running throughout the week-long Chicago Flower & Garden Show. At Navy Pier, Chicago. \$14 weekend, \$12 weekday entry fee. For more, go to www.chicagoflower.com

Tuesday, March 10, 1 p.m. and 7 p.m., **Renovate Your Garden or Landscape** at the Walled Lake library on Maple Road east of Pontiac Trail. Sponsored by the library and the Lakes Area Garden Club. Call the library at 248-624-3772 for more information.

Wednesday, March 11, 6 p.m. at the Fred C. Fischer library in downtown Belleville, Michigan, *Shade Gardening*. Janet covers plant selection, design and maintenance strategies, planting among tree roots, and soil preparation techniques for shady situations. \$20 voluntary contribution. Call 734-699-3291 to reserve a seat.

Pruning Trees and Shrubs

If you've ever wondered how and when to prune trees and shrubs to ensure beautiful bloom, good shape, manageable size, and healthy plants, this is for you: Garden designer and writer Janet Macunovich covers: How well and how long popular landscape plants hold up to pruning; Simple, proven techniques for keeping plants within the bounds you set. Macunovich encourages you to "Bring a branch!" Clip a limb from the plants you want to trim, to be sure they are included in the "how to!"

You can attend at one of these two locations:

- **Wednesday, March 18, 6-9 p.m.** at **Telly's Greenhouse**: 3301 John R Rd., just north of Big Beaver in Troy, Michigan. \$20 per session. Call Telly's to register: 248-689-8735
- **Wednesday, March 25, 6-9 p.m.** at **Fred C. Fisher Library** in downtown Belleville, Michigan. \$20 voluntary contribution. Call 734-699-3291 to reserve a seat.
- **Questions?** Call or email Janet: 248-681-7850 or JMaxGarden@aol.com

Saturday, March 21, Beginning Green. Part of the Taylor Conservatory Foundation and Wayne County Community College District's "Growing Great Gardens" event at Wayne County Community College, 21000 Northline Road in Taylor, Michigan. Janet explains how you can "green up" and improve your ecological footing each time you begin gardening, whether you're a beginning gardener or simply resuming your gardening in

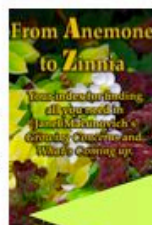
A gardening dream come true:

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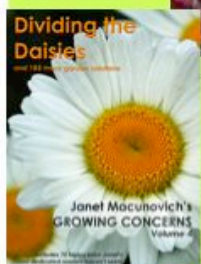
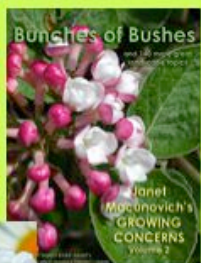
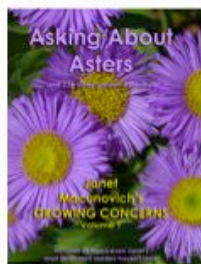
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Send your check payable to Janet Macunovich at 120 Lorberta, Waterford, MI 48328-3041

Include your name and complete mailing address.

Stay tuned to JMaxGarden@aol.com for information about the 2009 release of more from Janet's Growing Concerns files. (Are you on my mailing list? You should be! Just send me an email to receive my free weekly newsletter. Then you can begin compiling your own free library and annual index.)



Please let me know if you are interested in hard copies of this library. I am ready to issue one or all of these volumes in paperback in 2009, based on demand.

spring. Other topics include Growing Food in cities: One Plot at a Time, Attracting Butterflies and Pollinators, and Tips to Beautify Your Home and Community. 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. \$20. Advance registration recommended. Info and registration form at www.taylorconservatory.org/news.htm. Questions? Email taylorconservatory@sbcglobal.net.

About attending Gardens by Janet sessions:

We gardeners are let-me-see, hands-on people and that's how we learn best. In these sessions, I offer you that kind of chance to grow. You can visit me where I'm working and you can either watch or work with me side by side. I hope you'll bring your gloves and join in so you realize the most value for the time.

At the **gardens I tend through my business, Perennial Favorites**: I've worked for many years with some of my clients, who not only trust me with their landscapes but also understand my enthusiasm for teaching. They open their gardens to small groups who want to see and practice "how to." When the work I'm scheduled to do may be of interest to you and the situation allows on-lookers or apprentices, I invite you in.